

Strategy Research Project

Jeju Naval Base: Strategic Implications for Northeast Asia

by

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Abstract

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Due to its population, large economies and powerful militaries, the Yellow Sea is becoming the focal point of the most important region in the world. Events in the area unavoidably impact U.S. economic and security interests. In the middle of this critical area sits Jeju Island, on which the Republic of Korea (ROK) Navy is building a naval base. Jeju lies along the crossroads of the busiest ports in the world and astride strategically important economic resources. China, South Korea and Japan have several territorial disputes with each other that could spark a crisis; as a result they are all building up their maritime capabilities. Once complete, Jeju Naval Base will give the ROK Navy improved access to the open ocean for a growing blue-water fleet. China is likely to view Jeju as a threat due to its strategic fears of blockade, isolation and attack from U.S. aircraft carriers. The United States should derive its policy toward the base from two principles: first, to encourage South Korea to continue assuming an ever greater share of its own defense burden and secondly, to recognize that China will most likely feel threatened by the base's construction.

Jeju Naval Base: Strategic Implications for Northeast Asia

If the Asia-Pacific is the world's emerging geopolitical cockpit, the Yellow Sea is the Captain's chair.

—Abraham M. Denmark

The countries surrounding the Yellow Sea continue to grow in all forms of international power. The world's second-, fourth-, and twelfth-largest economies lie along the Yellow Sea. In 2006 the Yellow Sea Rim gross domestic product (GDP) reached over \$1.7 trillion, led by three of Asia's greatest political and financial centers—Beijing, Seoul and Shanghai.¹ The Yellow Sea catchment area contains more than a dozen urban areas with populations over 1 million people; about 600 million people total.² After years of rapid growth in China's maritime economy, the coastal region is home to 40% of the Chinese people, supports one of the world's largest merchant fleets and produces 60% of China's GDP.¹⁸ The Yellow Sea Rim is also home to two of the world's largest militaries.³ Due to its population, large economies and powerful militaries, the Yellow Sea is becoming the focal point of the most important region in the world.

Events in the Yellow Sea area unavoidably impact U.S. economic and security interests. The United States is a major, if not the lead, trading partner with all of the surrounding countries. The United States has explicit defense treaties with several Western Pacific countries and defense relations with many others. As evidenced by its rebalance toward the Asia-Pacific, the United States is committed to continued peaceful growth in the region.⁴

In the middle of this critical area sits Jeju Island, 45 nautical miles (nm) south of the Korean mainland. Jeju Island is at the confluence of the Yellow Sea to the north, the

East China Sea to the south, and the Korea Strait, which leads into the Sea of Japan, in the east. It is nearly equidistant from Shanghai and Incheon, the port servicing Seoul.

On this island the Republic of Korea (ROK) Navy is building a naval base, raising some strategic questions. What capabilities will this base give to South Korea? How will this base impact regional stability? What should United States policy be toward Jeju Naval Base?

Regional Trade and Economic Resources

Jeju lies along the crossroads of the busiest ports in the world. Shanghai, the world's #1 container port by volume (31.7 million-TEUs in 2011), sits opposite of Jeju 240 nm across the East China Sea.⁵ Also in the region are #5 Busan (16.2), #6 Ningbo-Zhoushan (14.7), #8 Qingdao (13.2), #11 Tianjin (11.6), #12 Kaohsiung (9.6) and #20 Dalian (6.4).⁶ To trade with Korea's major ports and six of China's 10 largest ports, shipping must cross the East China Sea, the Yellow Sea or both. From the Yellow Sea originates nearly 57% of China's and over 70% of South Korea's total trade volume.⁷ Kitakyushu, one of Japan's largest industrial complexes, is near the far end of the Korea Strait.⁸

Significant energy imports for both China and Korea traverse the area. Korea, with little indigenous energy production, is the world's fifth-largest crude buyer and the second-largest importer of liquefied natural gas.⁹ The Chinese economy relies on oil, natural gas, and other raw materials imported by sea.¹⁰ Petroleum imports into Dalian, coal and petroleum into Qinhuangdao, oil and coal into Qingdao and Tianjin—all must pass Jeju.¹¹

Much of this traffic travels through the Korea Strait. In 1996 7,387 vessels completed 75,293 voyages through the Strait. One-third of these voyages were by

vessels greater than 10,000 tons. Tankers of all sizes comprised 12.7% of voyages and very large tankers (greater than 100,000 tons) comprised 4.1%.¹²

The Western channel of the Korea Strait conveys considerable traffic, most of which stays within 6 miles of shore. Ship types include container, 400-500 dry weight metric ton liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) and tanker. Major destinations along the Western Channel include Yeosu, a major commercial & fishing port and important rail terminus, Busan, the largest ROK port and Ulsan, a container & tanker port.¹³

The Eastern Channel bears Japanese coastal vessels up to 140,000 tons, large northbound ships taking advantage of the Tsushima current, and hi-speed ferries. Eastern Channel destinations include Hakata in Fukuoka Bay, Kanmon Ko and Inland Sea ports. These ports service a major amount of bulk carrier traffic to and from the ROK and other destinations such as Taiwan.¹⁴

Jeju Island also lies astride strategically important economic resources. China, Japan and the Koreas all compete for fish in the waters near Jeju. The valuable fishing grounds in the Yellow Sea generate significant income for China and the Koreas; blue crab and other fish are in particular demand.¹⁵ In 2004 China took 30% of its total marine capture in the Yellow Sea and Bohai Gulf.¹⁶ In the Korea Strait, fishing goes year round. In deep water, boats displacing up to 100 tons and marine farms attended by service vessels are found, while fish havens and fixed-net fishing takes place closer to shore. All this activity complicates navigation as evidenced in 1998 when a ROK fishing boat sank after colliding with a U.S. Navy submarine south of Busan.¹⁷

Hydrocarbons are also prevalent in the region surrounding Jeju. The Korea Strait has oil, gas and coal resources including a natural gas reservoir 65 nm east of Busan

and coal deposits in the Eastern Channel.¹⁸ In the East China Sea, Jeju sits at the northern end of an oil-gas bearing basin stretching over 800 nm to the Taiwan Strait with major oil and gas discoveries 270 nm south.¹⁹ Estimates for oil reserves range anywhere from 70 to 160 billion barrels, while natural gas estimates range from 7 to 210 trillion cubic feet.²⁰ At its widest point the East China Sea is less than 400 nm across, resulting in the nominal 200 nm Japanese, Korean and Chinese economic exclusion zones overlapping. The Chunxiao / Shirakaba gas fields lie in this overlap area.²¹

The Yellow Sea is one of the largest shallow-water continental shelves in the world; average depth is only 144 feet. The East China Sea is also relatively shallow; over 75% is less than 600 feet.²² Because these waters are so shallow, the resources underneath them are easier to extract, making them more attractive to competing countries.

Disputes in the Area

The states along the Yellow and East China Seas have several territorial disputes with each other that could spark a crisis. These include the maritime boundary between the Koreas, the Socotra Rock and the Senkaku Islands. They also dispute each other's claimed exclusive economic zones (EEZs) and the activity permissible inside an EEZ.

The most violent dispute has been over the maritime boundaries between the Koreas. Six times in thirteen years the navies of North and South have clashed in the Yellow Sea. The ROK claims the Northern Limit Line (NLL) drawn by the United Nations in 1953 as the de facto boundary and flatly rejects a more southerly line drawn by North Korea. The current NLL forces North Korean ships to detour north when entering the

Yellow Sea, costing time and fuel, allows ROK Navy intelligence collectors inside of the normal 12 nm standoff from the North Korean coastline and keeps North Korean fishermen from lucrative blue crab fishing grounds. While the line proposed by North Korea appears more in keeping with international law, the South is unlikely to accept an NLL farther south because it would increase the difficulty of defending the ROK's Northwest Islands, allow North Korean warships closer to the Han River estuary that leads to Seoul and make it easier for the North to insert special operations forces.²³

Socotra Rock (leodo in Korean, Suyan Shi in Chinese) lies below 15ft of water in the East China Sea. Socotra sits in the overlap between the Chinese and South Korean EEZs, 80 nm from South Korea and 132 nm from China. The ROK finished an ocean research station, complete with a helicopter pad, atop Socotra in 2001. China considers the ROK's "unilateral" activities upon Socotra "illegal" and has responded with aircraft flyovers and ship patrols.²⁴ These patrols, which include PLAN military helicopters and vessels, have steadily increased in the past two years.²⁵

The Senkaku Islands (Diaoyu in Chinese) consist of five uninhabited islands and three rocky reefs under Japanese control, which means they are covered under the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty. Both China and Taiwan reject Japanese sovereignty, claiming the United States should have returned the islands, along with Taiwan, to China after World War II. At stake are potential energy resources and fishing in the surrounding waters.²⁶

China, South Korea and Japan all have overlapping EEZ claims in the East China Sea. Japan claims an EEZ that follows a median line between its territorial baseline and its neighbors; however China and South Korea both claim rights to the

continental shelf that extends to within 50 nm of the Ryuku Islands.²⁷ The Senkaku Islands, which Japan includes in drawing its baseline, further complicate the median line versus continental shelf dispute because they sit along the shelf's edge.

In the Yellow Sea, China refrains from directly challenging the South Korean EEZ. Instead it turns a blind-eye to illegal fishing in ROK-controlled waters.²⁸ Incidents between the ROK Coast Guard and Chinese fishermen have slowly increased, occurring at a rate of more than one per day. In December 2011, such an incident turned fatal when a Chinese fishing boat captain stabbed a South Korean Coast Guard officer during a boarding 85 nm east of Incheon.²⁹

While fishing and energy resource rights are again at stake in these competing EEZ claims, permissible activity within another state's EEZ is also at issue, in particular between the United States and China. The U.S. Navy deliberately exercises its freedom of navigation, including intelligence gathering, inside foreign EEZs, continually irritating China. State-controlled and PLAN vessels frequently shadow U.S. Navy-controlled ocean surveillance ships operating inside the Chinese EEZ. This shadowing can involve threats issued over marine band radio, aircraft flyovers and maneuvering that increases the risk of collision. While the most egregious such incident took place in the South China Sea when the Chinese harassed USNS *Impeccable* in March 2009, similar incidents involving USNS *Victorious* occurred in the Yellow Sea in March and May 2009.³⁰

Rising Maritime Powers

The Chinese, South Koreans and Japanese are all building up their navies and maritime capabilities. The People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) has bought diesel-powered attack submarines (SSKs), guided missile destroyers (DDGs) and maritime

strike aircraft from Russia. In indigenous shipyards, the PLAN has built DDGs, SSKs, SSNs, SSBNs, guided missile frigates (FFGs) and missile fast attack craft. In total, the PLAN has acquired 10 destroyers, 12 frigates and 36 submarines in the past decade. The PLAN is also expanding its power projection and expeditionary capabilities. China recently launched the first of as many as eight amphibious transport dock (LPD) ships. These may be augmented by larger amphibious assault ships (LHDs). The Chinese missile arsenal continues growing, including medium range ballistic missiles that could target aircraft carrier-sized warships. Finally, the PLAN's first aircraft carrier began operations as a "training ship."³¹

Across the Yellow Sea, the world's largest shipbuilder has made similar improvements. From 1998 to 2008, the ROK increased defense expenditures by 48%, much of that going to its navy. The ROK Navy is building three KDX-III DDGs with an option on three more. Carrying the U.S.-supplied Aegis weapon system, the KDX-III has a ballistic missile defense (BMD) capability. Adding to the ROK Navy submarine strength is the KSS-II. Based on the air-independent propulsion (AIP) German-designed Type 214, three KSS-IIs have joined the ROK Navy with six more possible. The two *Dokdo*-class amphibious assault ships (LPHs) significantly increase the ROK Navy's & Marine Corps' expeditionary capability.³²

Japan is also strengthening its maritime capabilities. While not increasing its force structure, Japan is improving its Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF) by replacing older ships with more capable ones. Of note, Japan announced in 2011 that it would increase its submarine force from 16 to 22 diesel-electric submarines, led by the new *Soryu*-class boats. Two 18,000 ton helicopter carriers recently joined the JMSDF;

two 19,500 ton carriers will be delivered in 2014. Japan continues building new destroyers; it now possesses six Aegis-equipped destroyers.³³

Jeju Naval Base

In 2011 the ROK Navy began construction of its newest base, located on Jeju's southern coast near the village of Gangjeong. Outlined in a 1993 plan with an estimated cost of nearly \$1 billion, the base will be the homeport for 20 warships including submarines and three KDX-III destroyers.³⁴ Covering nearly 120 acres, the base will be large enough to moor either two cruisers or an aircraft carrier.³⁵ In addition the ROK Air Force is building a search-and-rescue base on Jeju to assist the ROK Navy during operations in southern waters.³⁶ Although large enough to berth an aircraft carrier, the base will lack the facilities necessary for the U.S. Navy to operate long-term from Jeju.³⁷ Intense opposition by various civic groups succeeded in delaying construction by 13 months; completion is now planned for December 2015.³⁸

Forces Stationed at Jeju

The ROK Navy plans to operate Mobile Task Force Seven (MTF 7) from Jeju. Stood up in 2010, the core of MTF 7 consists of 2 destroyer squadrons; each squadron comprising of 1 KDX-III and 3 KDX-II ships. These destroyers will be supported by submarines, amphibious ships, naval special warfare units, ship salvage and naval aircraft. MTF 7 is part of the ROK Navy's plan to build a Strategic Mobile Fleet (SMF).³⁹

Recent improvements in Korean missile technology significantly increased the offensive capability of these ships. In November 2012, the ROK Navy deployed 52 Hyunmu 3C land attack cruise missiles aboard its KDX-III and II class destroyers.⁴⁰ Modeled on the U.S. Navy's Tomahawk missile, the subsonic Hyunmu 3C carries a 1000 lb warhead to ranges of 800 nm. The Hyunmu 3C can also be launched from ROK

Navy submarines.⁴¹ In 2013 the ROK Navy will deploy the new Haeseong II missile aboard its KDX-III and II ships. A supersonic land attack missile, the Haeseong II can strike targets at a range of 270 nm.⁴²

While naval base construction progresses, ROK Naval Air forces already operate from Jeju Island. Jeju Air Base (American designation K-40) is collocated with Jeju International Airport on the island's northern coast. Based here is the ROK Navy's 615 Squadron flying P-3C/CK maritime patrol aircraft and Lynx helicopters.⁴³

Potential Enhancements to ROK Navy Capabilities

Once complete, Jeju Naval Base will give the new SMF improved access to the open ocean. With that access the SMF can better operate at long-range, including the Malacca Strait.⁴⁴ While primarily intended to respond to threats in and around the Korean peninsula, the SMF expands the ROK Navy's blue-water capability, allowing it to protect South Korea's sea lines-of-communication (SLOCs) and support foreign policy objectives around the globe.⁴⁵ Jeju is ideal for this extended mission.

Jeju-based ships could easily guard the western entrance of the Korea Strait. By keeping out hostile vessels, the ROK Navy could: (1) prevent mining of South Korean ports located along the strait, (2) prevent seaborne insertion of special operations forces attempting to strike critical rear area targets, and (3) protect re-supply and reinforcements ships bound for ports in the Korea Strait. These capabilities are critical to protecting South Korea's oil import-dependent, export driven economy.⁴⁶

Jeju-based forces will improve South Korea's regional ballistic missile defense capabilities. Against North Korean missiles, a strictly sea-based BMD could only defend coastal areas and the southern third of South Korea.⁴⁷ Against Chinese missiles, however, KDX-III launched interceptors would be effective. Jeju-based ships could also

defend southern Japan, including the Ryukyu Islands and American bases on Okinawa, against both North Korean and Chinese ballistic missiles.⁴⁸

Jeju also better positions the ROK Navy to influence its territorial disputes in the East China Sea, including Socotra Rock and continental shelf EEZ claim.⁴⁹ Today it takes over 21 hours for ROK Navy ships from Busan Naval Base to arrive at Socotra Rock; Jeju will cut the time to 7 hours. In comparison, PLAN ships at Shanghai are 13 hours away.⁵⁰ The other nearby ROK Navy bases at Mokpo, Jinhae and Busan, access the open waters through more constricted and shallower waters. In contrast, Jeju Naval Base will have direct access to relatively deep water.

Factors Driving the ROK Buildup

The current ROK defense policy is “cooperative self-reliant defense.” This policy reflects Seoul’s growing nationalism and self-assertiveness in defense and foreign affairs. After decades as the clear junior partner, South Korea wishes to rebalance its alliance with the United States. To further these goals, the ROK is using various military acquisition programs to increase its armed forces’ capacity to act independently of American support.⁵¹

A major factor driving this emphasis on self-reliance is the shrinking number and redefined role of American troops on the peninsula. The United States is removing 12,500 troops, leaving 25,000, the lowest number since before the Korean War. Those remaining will no longer solely orient toward defending against North Korea, but instead use South Korea as a base to conduct multifunctional, expeditionary missions in the region beyond the peninsula under a new policy of strategic flexibility.⁵²

Some of this buildup has occurred with American encouragement, particularly with BMD. Currently, the United States and its allies have only low-level missile defense

ties. In the future the United States envisions an integrated regional BMD system that includes South Korea.⁵³

The United States decreasing force levels and focusing on threats elsewhere both justifies and necessitates the ROK increasing its own defense capabilities. To allow its forces to operate more independently, Seoul has embarked on a major, multiyear recapitalization. For the ROK Navy, this means building a blue-water fleet.⁵⁴

Jeju Island is a critical piece in assembling a blue-water maritime capability. The ROK Navy considers Jeju “a tactical, strategic point to secure southern sea lanes for transporting energy supplies and to conduct mobile operations in the case of emergency in the region.”⁵⁵ A naval base on the island will increase its power projection ability in the East China Sea and southward.⁵⁶

In 2005 the ROK Ministry of National Defense outlined this power projection strategy in Defense Reform Plan 2020 (DRP 2020). This document predicted that the North Korean threat would diminish over time. Jeju Naval Base is consistent with other regional threats rising in priority.⁵⁷

Among these threats is China. South Korea views China as an economic menace, causing the ROK to adopt a stronger political and security posture.⁵⁸ In the case of Socotra Rock, South Korea considers this reef a buffer zone between itself and China. “The (Jeju) naval base will help Korea effectively counter China’s increasingly assertive territorial claims” over this buffer. If it cedes to China control of Socotra, South Korea fears exposing Jeju to the same security challenges faced by its western border islands near the NLL.⁵⁹

Regional Reaction to Jeju Naval Base

Like Pavlov's dog, North Korea publicly salivates with suspicion whenever it hears the ringing of South Korean military activity, real or imagined. The North's reaction to construction on Jeju follows this pattern, branding the South Korean "puppet regime's" action an "unpardonable treachery to escalate tension on the Korean Peninsula and turn the island into the [sic] U.S. nuclear outpost."⁶⁰

Despite this reflexive rhetoric, the Jeju Naval Base is unlikely to provoke North Korea into upsetting regional stability. Jeju Naval Base is nearly 300 nm from the NLL. Ships based at Pyeongtaek and Mokpo could respond much quicker to a maritime border incident. While the base would certainly have great utility in any conflict with the North, Jeju is too far south for North Korea to consider it a direct threat.

All things considered, Japan and its Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF) are also unlikely to view Jeju Naval Base as a threat. Jeju-based ships could intercept Japanese shipping headed into the Korea Strait and help assert the ROK's continental shelf claim inside the Japanese EEZ. To date, however, tension between South Korea and Japan over the continental shelf dispute has remained low. Jeju Naval Base is 360 nm from Liancourt Rocks; ships based at Donghae, Busan and Jinhae could respond much quicker to this hotly disputed area. In the unlikely event of war with South Korea, Japan could simply route its shipping to travel east of the Ryukyu Islands and avoid any threat from Jeju. On the contrary, given the larger geopolitical picture, the Japanese and South Korean governments will likely seek cooperation as China's power increases. Forces based at Jeju would be well positioned to support Japan in a conflict with China over the Senkaku Islands.

China on the other hand is much more likely to view Jeju a threat, denouncing the planned base in 2004.⁶¹ To explain why, one must understand several of China's strategic fears, all of which Jeju Naval Base will aggravate.

The first fear is of an island blockade. The Chinese military believes a foreign aggressor could blockade China simply by fortifying the “first island chain” stretching from Japan to the Philippines. They see the chain as a natural geographic obstacle choking China's access to the open ocean and believe that surrounding countries are actively exploiting this obstacle.⁶² Building Jeju Naval Base, located at the northern end of the chain, strengthens this belief. From Jeju the ROK (or U.S.) Navy could bottle up PLAN vessels operating from Yellow Sea bases at Qingdao, Dailan, Lushun and Huludao.

As they fear being blockaded in, conversely, the Chinese also fear being cut off from their SLOCs. They are acutely aware how vulnerable their SLOCs are, in particular the petroleum lifeline.⁶³ Shipping lanes to Tienjin (port of Beijing), Qingdao, Dalian and other Yellow Sea and Bohai Bay ports all run past Jeju Island. Jeju-based submarines would hang over these SLOCs like a guillotine blade.

China slowly turning up the pressure in its various territorial disputes reflects its fear of losing maritime resources. Due to the PLAN's perceived weakness, the Chinese believe foreign powers are poaching valuable resources, as noted in the 2006, 2008 and 2010 editions of China's defense white papers.⁶⁴ As the growing Chinese economy consumes an ever increasing mountain of resources, any leakage is seen as a threat to future development.⁶⁵ The thought of Jeju-based ships challenging China's claim to Socotra irritates this fear.

In any conflict with the United States, China fears strikes launched from U.S. Navy aircraft carriers.⁶⁶ In 2010 this fear surfaced when the U.S. and ROK Navy conducted combined exercises in the Yellow Sea in response to North Korea's sinking ROKS *Cheonan* and bombarding Yeongpyeong Island. China publicly opposed the exercises as unnecessarily provocative, in particular the aircraft carrier USS *George Washington*'s participation, claiming that the United States was trying to "threaten the Chinese people and test China's bottom line."⁶⁷ Since Jeju Naval Base is advertised to be large enough to berth an aircraft carrier, its construction likely stokes this fear. Assuming a nominal 500 nm combat radius for its strike aircraft, a U.S. aircraft carrier berthed at Jeju could be in position to attack Beijing in under five hours.

Finally, China fears Taiwanese independence. The Chinese Communist Party's legitimacy rests in part on its legacy of ending the "Century of Humiliation." In Chinese eyes, Taiwanese independence would strike a catastrophic blow to that legitimacy. Further, the PLA would see an independent Taiwan as a threat to Chinese shipping and a potential base for a foreign aggressor to contain China and fortify the First Island Chain.⁶⁸ During a crisis in the Taiwan Strait, PLAN ships from the North Sea Fleet attempting to join the fight would have to sail right past Jeju Island and its submarines. In addition, Jeju-based forces could harass PLAN vessels operating from the more southerly ports at Shanghai and Dinghai.

South Korean land attack cruise missiles launched from Jeju-based ships could strike a wide range of targets across Northeast Asia. Launched from just outside Jeju Naval Base, Hyunmu 3C missiles could range targets anywhere in North Korea. Much of China would be in range, including Beijing and all North and East Sea Fleet bases.

Most of Japan, including Tokyo, would be in range and all of Taiwan. Flying at subsonic speeds, Jeju-based missiles could strike Shanghai in approximately 30 minutes. The soon to be released Haeseong II missiles will cover the same distance in 20 minutes.

To mitigate these fears, in 2004 China gave priority to increasing its ability to win command of the sea by building up the PLAN, PLA Air Force (PLAAF) and Second Artillery Corps. Operationally, China likely defines “command of the sea” as extending 200-300 nm from its coast; equivalent to the combat radius of PLAAF fighters.⁶⁹ Such a sea control zone would include the Yellow Sea, much of the East China Sea and the Taiwan Strait.

Jeju Naval Base could contest both the PLAN’s and the PLAAF’s ability to “command the sea.” Situated 235 nm from China, Jeju is inside China’s sea control zone. Jeju-based submarines would threaten PLAN ships attempting to gain sea control. Jeju-based air defense ships, like the KDX-III, would threaten PLAAF aircraft attempting to gain air superiority over the sea control zone. Since the PLAAF does not have a long-range, air-launched anti-ship missile, PLAAF planes cannot attack Aegis equipped ships from outside their surface-to-air missile (SAM) envelopes.⁷⁰

Fueled by historical grievances and continuing antagonism, China, South Korea and Japan are warily increasing their defenses. As they do so, the chances rise that tensions over territorial disputes could spur these countries into a full-fledged arms race. If China perceives Jeju Naval Base as a threat, it could contribute to this destabilization, particularly if China sees it as part of a larger U.S. strategy to contain China.

U.S. Policy Toward Jeju Naval Base: Some Recommendations

The United States should derive its policy toward the base from two principles: first, to encourage South Korea to continue assuming an ever greater share of its own

defense burden and secondly, to recognize that China will most likely feel threatened by the base's construction.

A strong South Korea serves American interests because it helps reduce the overall U.S. defense burden. A slow growing U.S. economy and climbing Federal debt make cuts to the U.S. armed forces unavoidable. After costly wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, overseas U.S. bases are unpopular with Congress. To the extent Jeju Naval Base improves the ROK's ability to take care of itself, it serves U.S. interests.

Under certain circumstances, Jeju Naval Base could offer great utility to the U.S. Navy. Jeju is an ideal location from which to operate ocean surveillance ships, oceanographic survey ships and their surface combatant escorts patrolling in the Yellow and East China Seas. The port has easy access to relatively deep water and is close to patrol areas. In case of war with North Korea, U.S. Navy ships and aircraft operating from Jeju could protect U.S. shipping heading to port in both Korea and southern Japan. They could also support Japan in a conflict with China over the Senkaku Islands. Together, the Yellow and East China Seas form approximately 70% of China's eastern seaboard.⁷¹ During a conflict in the Taiwan Strait, Jeju-based U.S. ships, submarines and aircraft could easily intercept North Sea Fleet units heading south and harass the flank of the East Sea Fleet.

In spite of these potential advantages, the United States has wisely been quiet about Jeju Naval Base and should remain so, lest it cause China to overreact. China has complained before to South Korea about its BMD ties with the United States. If mishandled, the base could provoke China to upgrade its strategic deterrent, sparking a regional arms race.⁷²

The United States must also be sensitive to the Korean people's perceptions that the United States is attempting to draw the ROK into a larger conflict with China. Many, particularly younger Koreans, believe the United States is playing on the ROK's fear of China and pressuring South Korea to advance U.S. interests. The new strategic flexibility policy brought Korean public concerns into sharp relief, resulting in a public quarrel between the two allies. To resolve the issue the United States agreed to honor the ROK's desire to not be "involved in a regional conflict in Northeast Asia against the will of the Korean people."⁷³

Once completed, and at the invitation of South Korea, the United States should send ships to call at Jeju Naval Base. A medium-sized ship, such as an *Arleigh Burke* class destroyer, should make the first visit. Such a ship would be comparable to those already calling at the port of Incheon in the northern Yellow Sea. It would be large enough to show support for our South Korean allies, but too small for China to view its visit as a U.S. escalation.

The first visit should be short, no more than three days. A longer visit might stoke fears among both the local population and in China that the United States intends to establish a permanent presence. The ship's company should treat liberty at Jeju Island as a mission. After losing a long political battle to stop construction, many of the local people will likely still have hurt feelings. The impression left by the first visit will set the tone for future visits. All hands should be required to go ashore in uniform to present the best image of American Sailors and to encourage their best behavior. The visiting ship should come from a recent port visit elsewhere. If the visit ship spends too long at sea prior to calling at Jeju Island, the risk of Sailors overdoing it while "blowing off steam"

increases. With the help of the ROK Navy, the ship's company should take part in as many community relations (COMMREL) projects as possible, particularly in neighboring Gangjeong Village.

After leaving Jeju, the same American ship should visit a Chinese naval base in the region, such as Shanghai.⁷⁴ Once again, the Sailors should dress in uniform while on liberty and take on visible COMMREL projects. By following up a Jeju visit with a China visit, the United States can demonstrate support for its ROK ally and reassure both China and the South Korean people that the United States seeks friendly relations in the region.

After the first visit, other small and medium-sized ships should call at Jeju Island at a periodicity comparable to the U.S. Navy's visit rate to Incheon. However, the overall number of U.S. ships entering the Yellow Sea should not increase lest the Chinese view this as an American escalation.

The United States should delay sending an aircraft carrier to call at Jeju Island. Regardless of the reason, China views an aircraft carrier entering the Yellow Sea as an American provocation. The United States should view sending an aircraft carrier to Jeju as a new strategic communication lever it can use with China in the future. A Jeju port call is less provocative than sailing into the heart of the Yellow Sea. It is more aggressive than a visit to Busan or Sasebo. From Jeju an aircraft carrier can easily head north to escalate with little additional risk or east to deescalate with no loss of prestige. The United States should save an aircraft carrier visit until an appropriate occasion arises when it is necessary to subtly get China's attention.

The new Jeju Naval Base is a bellwether of the rise of the ROK Navy. Like past rising navies, it springs from a rising political, military, and economic power. The ROK Navy's growth, like that of the JMSDF, has been in response to the growth of another rising navy: the PLAN. If history is a guide, they might eventually collide in combat.⁷⁵ Given its strategic location, Jeju Naval Base is positioned to play a significant role as this competition develops.

Endnotes

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